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Volunteers in the Courts News

Fall 2002

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Walworth County honors volunteer

The Walworth County Circuit Court judges recently chose Deborah Bartholomay to receive the Volunteer Services Award for her work with Parenting After Separation (PAS).

Bartholomay is only the second recipient of the award; the first was the Rev. Sue D'Alessio, an Elkhorn minister, for her work on the Children's Court Advisory Board (CCAB). The local judges created CCAB in



Deborah Bartholomay, center, receives the Walworth County Circuit Court's Volunteer Services Award for her work with Parenting after Separation. Presenting the award are, from left, Judges John R. Race, James L. Carlson, Michael S. Gibbs, and Robert J. Kennedy, and Court Commissioner Judith Stern.

1990 in response to growing concerns about child sexual abuse. The multidisciplinary group works to improve how the system handles child abuse and neglect cases. "This is something we do on occasion when we feel that somebody has done enough to warrant recognition for their contributions to the court system," said Judge Michael S. Gibbs.

Since 1993, PAS has been guiding separating couples through legal issues and helping parents understand how children of different ages react to divorce. Currently all parents in Walworth County who are separating are ordered to attend PAS, and the program is also open to grandparents and stepparents.

The two-session, two-hour program uses volunteers to meet with the parents. Bartholomay's skills and volunteer time are invaluable to the program. She orients families to the courtroom and answers questions they may have on custody or mediation. Bartholomay said parents often are not happy about going to the PAS classes. But it doesn't take long before they find it helpful and they

leave happier for having attended.

In developing the program, Bartholomay drew on her personal experience and teamed up with Court Commissioner Judith Stern to contact mothers, fathers, psychologists, counselors, and teachers to help design the components. Soon after PAS was started, Bartholomay began leading the classes herself.

Walworth County attributes the success of the PAS program to the dedication of Bartholomay. "We have found the most successful way to help children experiencing divorce," Stern said, "is to empower their parents."

For more information about PAS, contact Beth Smith at the Walworth County Clerk of Courts Office, (262) 741-4224.

Volunteer programs finding support, success

Several successful volunteer programs have made the headlines lately. The buzz is that volunteer programs are proving to be an effective and innovative way to stretch the resources of the courts and give citizens a voice in the system.

Milwaukee Teen Tribunal is launched

The City of Milwaukee began a teen court on November 7 in two local high schools. Initially, the program will operate as a pilot in Madison High School and John Burroughs Middle School. Teens who have committed offenses on school grounds or in surrounding neighborhoods will be recommended for the court either by the Milwaukee Municipal Court or the school system.

Unlike many teen courts, this one uses teens in all the roles, from judges to bailiffs to court clerks and attorneys. The first teens to operate the court went through a training program in October; offenders who participate will be required to serve in the court in the future. The teen judges sit in a panel of three and question the offender prior to determining consequences. They follow guidelines for imposing restorative sentences, which are written into a contract that all involved must sign. The Social Development Commission (SDC), one of the partners in the program, will monitor each offender's fulfillment of his/her contract.

Planning for the project, called Teen Tribunal, began three years ago, and Milwaukee Municipal Judge James A. Gramling Jr. steered the effort. Gramling worked with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the SDC, the Milwaukee Police Department, and Milwaukee Public Schools to implement the new court.

Gramling started the effort after seeing too many teens create more trouble for themselves by missing court appearances. Many of the underlying offenses started on school grounds, so Gramling began searching for a model that would

involve the schools.

If the pilot program succeeds at the two schools, organizers will apply for a grant to expand the Teen Tribunal to schools throughout Milwaukee.

Restorative justice comes to Eau Claire

A nine-year-old boy, big for his age and considered high risk, regularly bullies an 11-year-old. The bully is referred to Juvenile Court Intake, which calls upon Eau Claire's new Restorative Justice Program (RJP) for help. The program offers victim-offender conferencing - a facilitated, face-to-face dialogue - in selected juvenile cases (see *The Third Branch*, summer 2002 for a full explanation of the initiative). The staff meets separately with the boys to ensure that they are appropriate for the program. They also invite the parents to participate but, in this case, both sides decline. The RJP staff brings the boys to the office and facilitates a discussion in which the nine-year-old moves from extended silences to an eloquent apology. The program staff takes the two boys to dinner and they play together for an hour at a local McDonald's Playland. Follow-up is handled by an "accountability mentor," a trained volunteer who reinforces the nine-year-old's restorative efforts and ensures that the 11-year-old's needs have been met. Problem solved.

This case is one of 36 referred to the RJP since it began operation in August. It is typical in the sense that many of the cases involve light, petty, and pre-criminal offenses like bullying. "We're the first program that is working to intervene as early as possible, to plant a seed of accountability," said Program Director Loren Bennesch. Most of the program's cases are referrals from Juvenile Court Intake; however, the program is becoming a new option for bench orders, deferred agreements, and delinquency prevention efforts. While cases have involved a participant age range of eight-17, the average client is about 12.

The program received a grant in 2002 from the Office of Justice Assistance Juvenile Delinquency and Prevention Act funds. The Governor's Commission recently renewed the grant for fiscal 2003. Steering the effort is a multi-disciplinary advisory board chaired by Eau Claire County Circuit Court Judge Lisa K. Stark.

Teen court and small claims in Fond du Lac

Fond du Lac County has two programs that have been successful in reducing caseload and speeding disposition of cases. The Teen Court has handled more than 50 cases since it was started a little over a year ago. The court requires young offenders to admit the offense and be accompanied by a parent or guardian. A jury of their peers issues creative sentences that normally include a requirement that they perform jury duty in a future Teen Court proceeding.

Another program, Conflict Resolution, has been so successful for Fond du Lac County that the circuit court judges decided to make it mandatory for small claims cases. Currently the program has 19 volunteers that have mediated 2,526

cases and had a 76 percent success rate in 2001. Operated by the Fond du Lac Conflict Resolution Center, Inc., the program gives people with disputes involving less than \$5,000 the opportunity to work out their own agreements with the help of a trained volunteer mediator. If a resolution is not reached, the case is set for trial.

Green Bay Youth Court expands in county

When police in the Brown County communities of Ashwaubenon and De Pere wanted to refer kids to the Green Bay Youth Court, the Youth Court initially had to turn them down. The court's federal grant only funds services to kids in the City of Green Bay. But the enterprising volunteers who work with the Youth Court wanted to meet the need so they took to the streets, selling 1,500 candy bars to raise money for a countywide program. Along with a \$1,000 grant from the Green Bay Rotary Foundation, the candy bar fund is now enabling the Youth Court to take referrals from all of Brown County.

To ensure the future financial stability of the expanded Youth Court, the court volunteers and police officers are speaking to community groups and business organizations. The court's mission – to serve kids between the ages of eight and 11 who are involved in petty offenses such as shoplifting – strikes a chord with the business community.

The Youth Court handled its first case in October 2000 and will process about 50 cases this year. It convenes one night per week in the Brown County Courthouse, although that may change to two nights given the expansion. Most nights, the hearing examiner (a group of about 15 volunteer attorneys handle this assignment on a rotation) hears two cases. The jury, comprised of volunteer fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders including former offenders, questions the offender and decides the sentence.

Most often, police refer kids to the Youth Court but sometimes referrals come directly from storeowners who have caught young shoplifters. The program staff screens the children and talks with the parents to make sure that participation in Youth Court is appropriate.

The Youth Court is an effort to reach kids who are too young for the Teen Court, which has operated in Brown County for four-and-a-half years, handling more than 1,100 cases.

Successful mediation program recognized

The Mediation Center of Waukesha County, which uses trained volunteers to help local residents solve their disputes, was featured on the front page of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on October 14.

The center uses a team of 35 volunteer mediators— former school administrators, doctors, lawyers, teachers, social workers, and more— who conduct confidential mediations at the center's office and at other public buildings such as libraries.

The newspaper highlighted one difficult case involving Town of Mukwonago neighbors and a feud over a pot-bellied pig. "It escalated from there into every little petty thing you can imagine," the pigs' owner, Tracy Zettelmeier, told the newspaper. Eventually, the neighbor sued Zettelmeier and sought a harassment injunction.

When the court commissioner ordered mediation, Zettelmeier thought it would never work. So she was surprised, she said, when in less than 90 minutes and with the help of two volunteer mediators, she and the neighbor were able to arrive at an agreement.

The *Journal Sentinel* reported that about 70 percent of the people who seek help from the center's volunteers walk out with an agreement. Center Director Cathy Warmington told the newspaper that the police have taken note of the success rate and are increasingly referring feuding neighbors to the center.